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ABSTRACT

This booklet offers practical, easy-to-read suggestions for teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents to help them understand learning development and learning disabilities. The text outlines how the factors of heredity, maturation, and environment determine the degree of development an individual will achieve. The characteristics of children with learning disabilities are described, and a number of special techniques to assist children in overcoming these disabilities are discussed. This text should prove especially helpful in the training of teachers and caregivers who work with handicapped children in regular classrooms. Cartoon-style drawings illustrate the text. (CS)

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UNDERSTANDING YOUNG CHILDREN: LEARNING DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING DISABILITIES

By
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Illustrated by
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The Understanding Young Children Series

This series of five booklets offers practical, easy-to-read suggestions for teachers, parents, and caregivers working with normal and handicapped young children. Individual titles are:

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(Set of 5 booklets: $7.00)

The UYC Series was made available through the Alaska Treatment Center for Crippled Children and Adults, Anchorage, Alaska. We would like to thank the center's staff members for permitting us to reprint this series.

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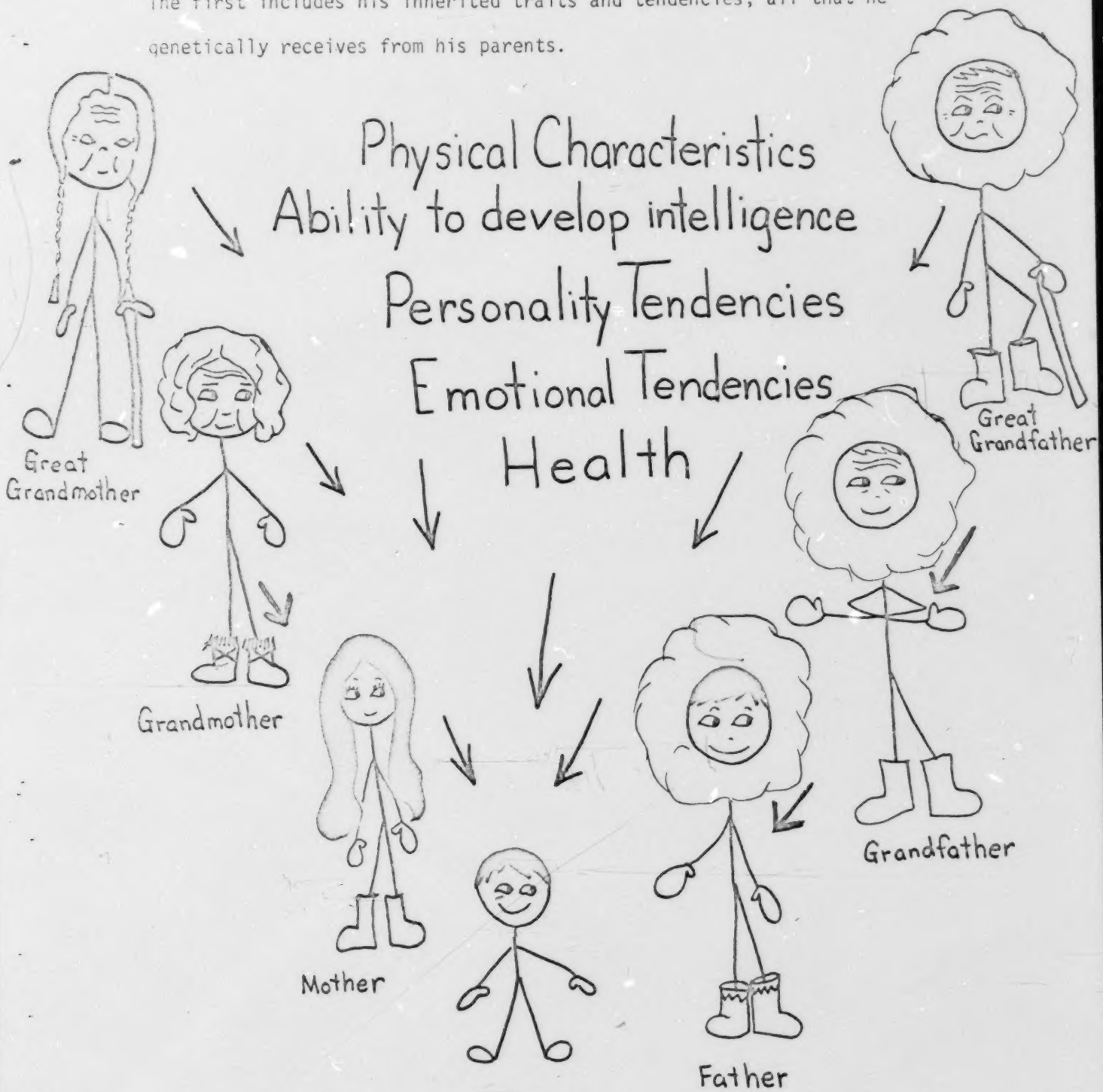
DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

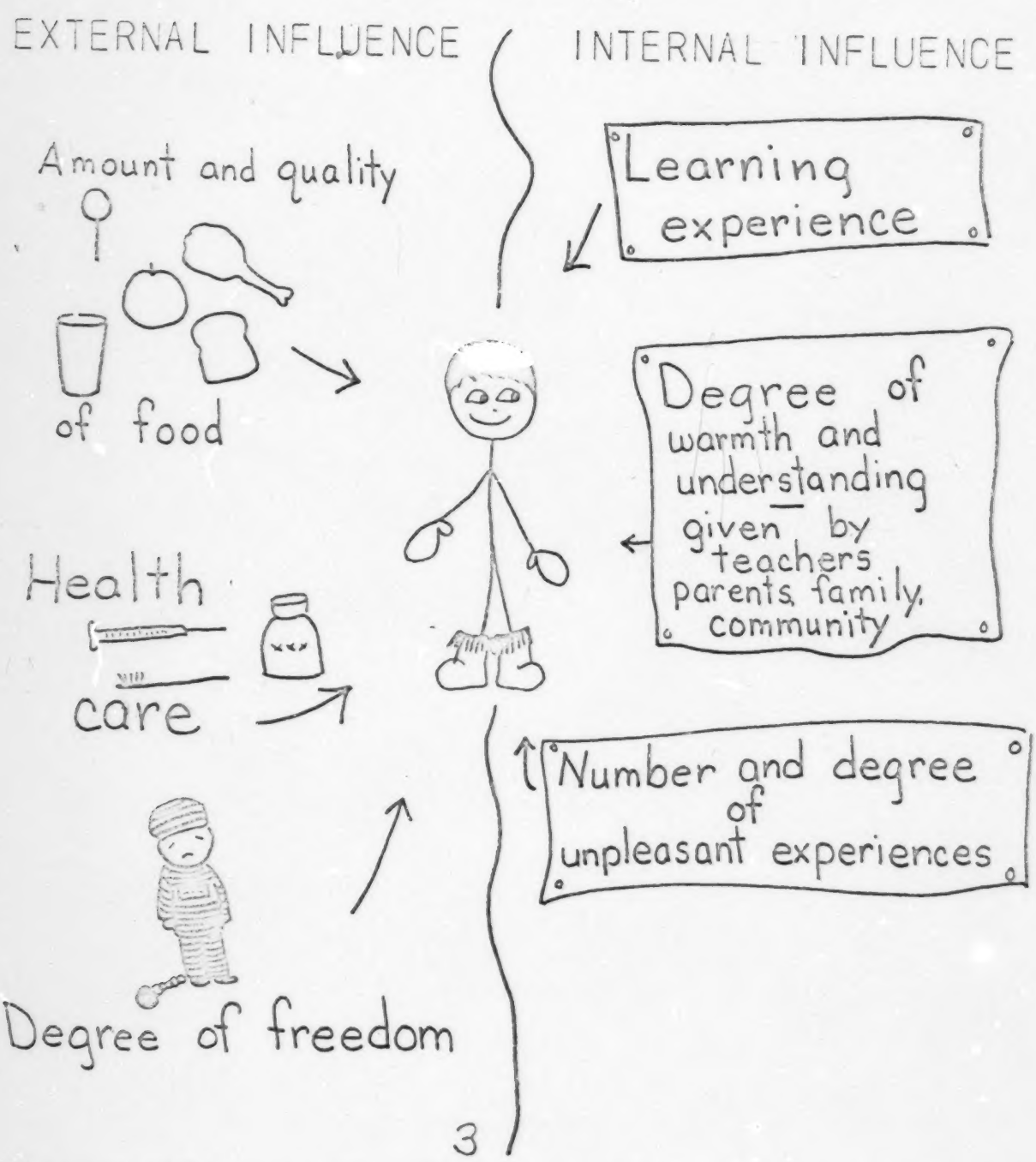
DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

Heredity and Environment

The pattern of a child's development is based on two major elements. The first includes his inherited traits and tendencies; all that he genetically receives from his parents.

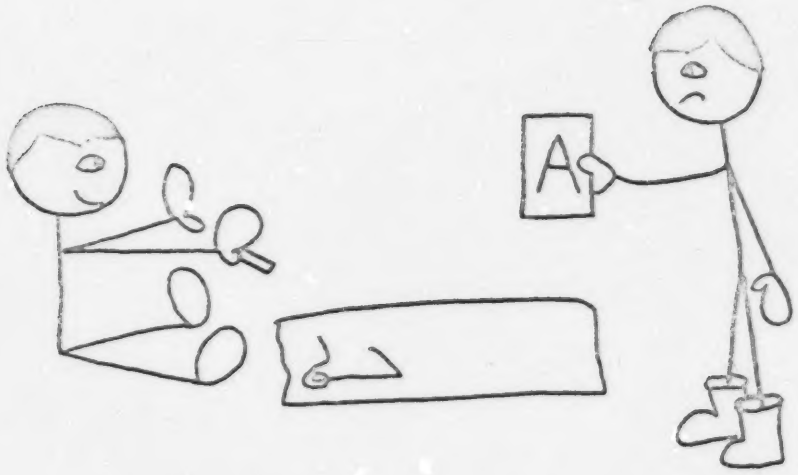


The second is the environment in which he grows, the conditions of life that surround the child and which have great influence on his development. This element is of primary concern to the pre-school teacher.



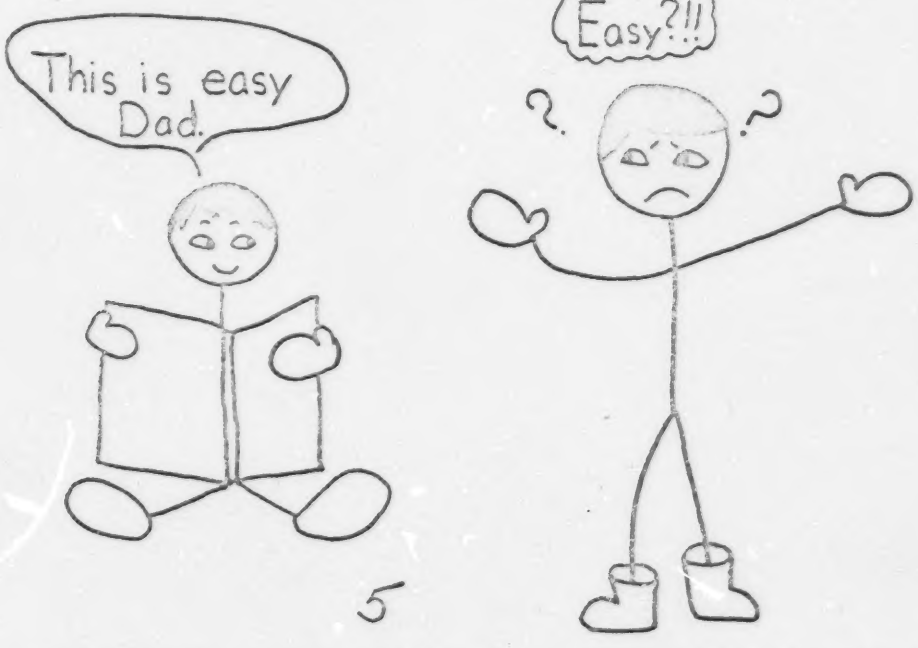
Maturation and Learning

All areas of development require the proper combination of maturation and learning for satisfactory progress. There are prime times in every stage of development when the child is ready to learn a specific task. If he is not at the point of readiness (maturation), no amount of instruction will help. Even if you could spend a month trying to teach a two year old how to write, he will not learn because he is not ready or mature enough for this task. The muscles in his fingers are not yet capable of controlling a pencil, and he has not developed the ability to understand the meaning of symbols. No matter how willing he is, he cannot learn to write at this time.



These prime times for learning are important in another way. If a child is not taught a specific task when he is ready, it will be twice as hard for him to learn the skill. For example, if for some reason a child is not allowed to walk until the age of eight, even if his muscles are in perfect condition it will be much more difficult for him to learn to walk than it will be for a one and a half year old who has just reached his prime time for learning this skill. This concept is especially important for adults who work with children with various handicapping conditions. Such children often reach prime time for learning a specific skill later than the average child. If they pass through some prime times without learning the skills they will have to try to learn the skills later in life, when it will be more difficult.

Adults often are annoyed when it seems that their children can learn certain skills faster than they can. This is a normal aspect of development, however. Certainly it is easier for a pre-school child to learn a new language than it is for an adult. The pre-school child is in his prime time for learning language, but the adult has passed his prime time long ago.



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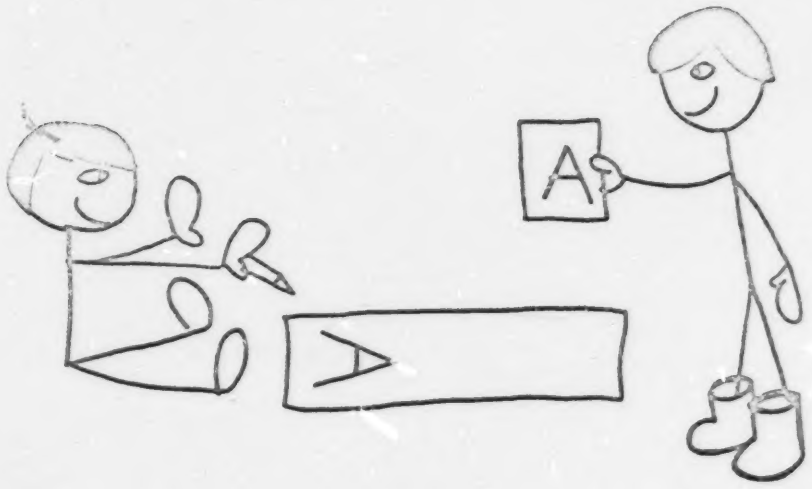
During the maturational prime time, however, favorable learning situations can do much to assist a child in reaching his greatest potential in any developmental area.



Many prime learning times occur at the pre-school level. This makes pre-school teaching a most important job.

The Total Child

Development may be divided into such different kinds as physical, intellectual, emotional, and others. It is important to remember, however, that development is occuring at the same time in all the different areas. They are also constantly interacting with each other and affecting each other.

A child who has emotional trouble often has little desire to learn. This may effect other areas of his development, intellectual, social, language, etc. A child who has a language problem can develop emotional and social problems because of his handicap.

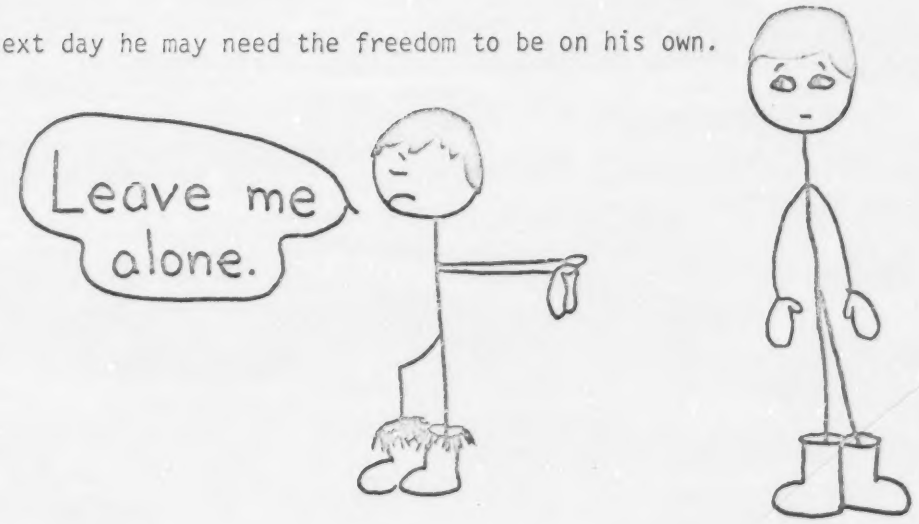
It is important that adults be more concerned with the total child than with any specific area of development.

The Individual Child

It is important to understand that the growth pattern of any child is different from that of any other child, and that the needs of any child may differ from the needs of another child, even at the same age.

In the normal process of development, the particular needs of a child will change as he grows. One day he may need a great deal of adult guidance and support,

and the next day he may need the freedom to be on his own.



In the developing individual, changes are constantly taking place. These changes cannot always be seen, and sometimes they appear to pop up suddenly. Their "sudden" appearance, however, is usually evidence of a long succession of quiet and unseen developments.

Conditions for Good Development

Parents and teachers are probably the most important people in helping the young child develop to his greatest potential. The elements we have discussed, heredity, maturation, and environment, determine the degree of development an individual will achieve.

HEREDITY		MATURATION		ENVIRONMENT
Inherited traits and tendencies	+	Prime time (Readiness)	+	Favorable learning situations

= GOOD DEVELOPMENT

Most adults have little control over heredity, but certainly they can become aware of a child's readiness level, and can supply a favorable learning situation at the proper moment.

Favorable Learning Situations

It would be easy to go on at length about providing favorable learning situations. At this point only two very important subjects will be presented:

Motivation - This means the desire to learn. Learning is much easier and more meaningful if a child is interested in and excited about it. If he is bored and uninterested, learning can be a difficult struggle. A teacher or parent who stimulates a love of learning in a child has given him something that will help him through the rest of his life.

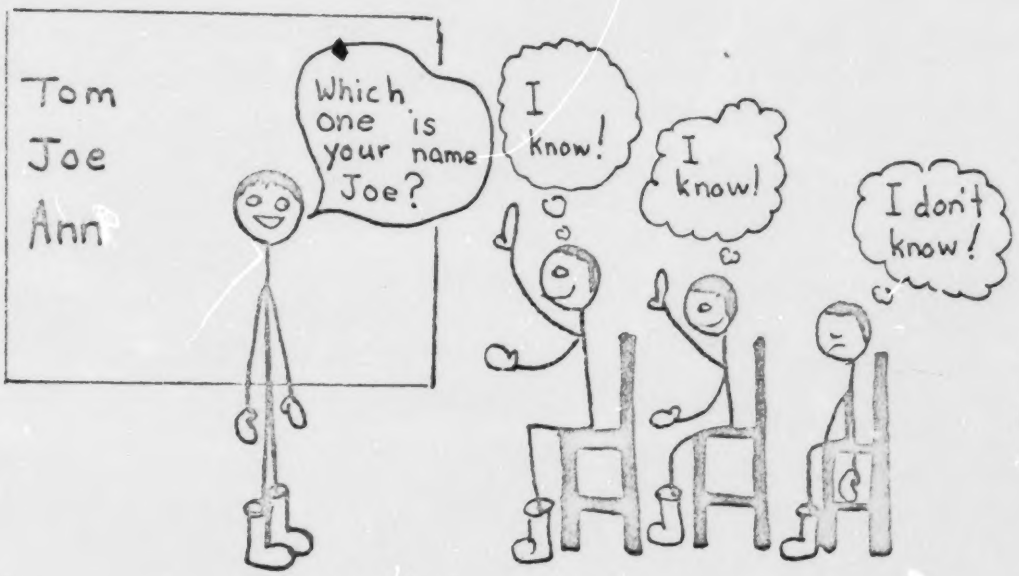
Correct matching - This involves the degree of difficulty found in any learning situation. If an activity is too easy, the child will usually become bored and uninterested. If the activity is too difficult for him, the child will probably become frustrated and leave the task because he cannot succeed. A learning situation that is neither too easy nor too difficult is the most desirable.

Development is not an easy process, and much can happen to interrupt it. In sections that follow some related problems will be discussed.

LEARNING DISABILITIES

Learning Disabilities

The term "learning disability" can be confusing. For our purposes here, the term will refer to children who have adequate abilities in intelligence, motor ability, vision, hearing, and emotional adjustment, but still show evidence of deficiency in learning.

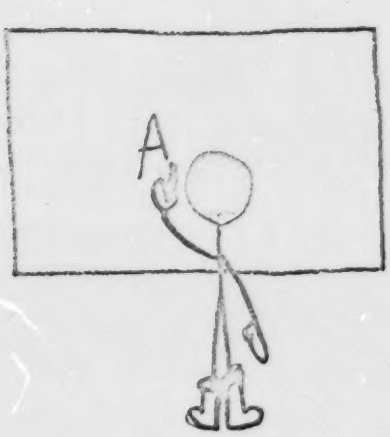


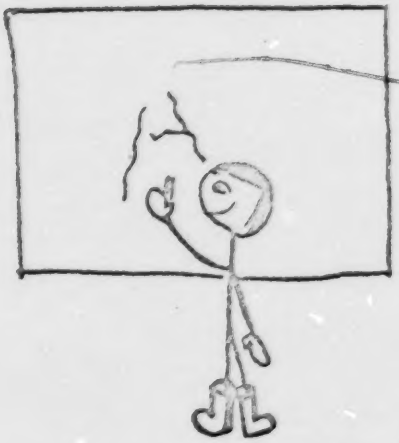
This kind of deficiency is caused by a dysfunction in the brain that incorrectly interprets some aspects of what the child perceives.

Children with such disability often cannot learn in the usual ways. They are quite capable of learning, but special techniques must be applied to assist them.

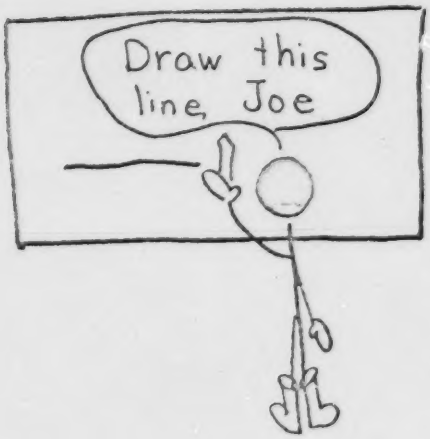
Children with learning disabilities sometimes display the following characteristics:

1. Poor hand-eye coordination - Difficulty in making his hand do what his eyes tell him in such tasks as copying, tracing, throwing a ball accurately.

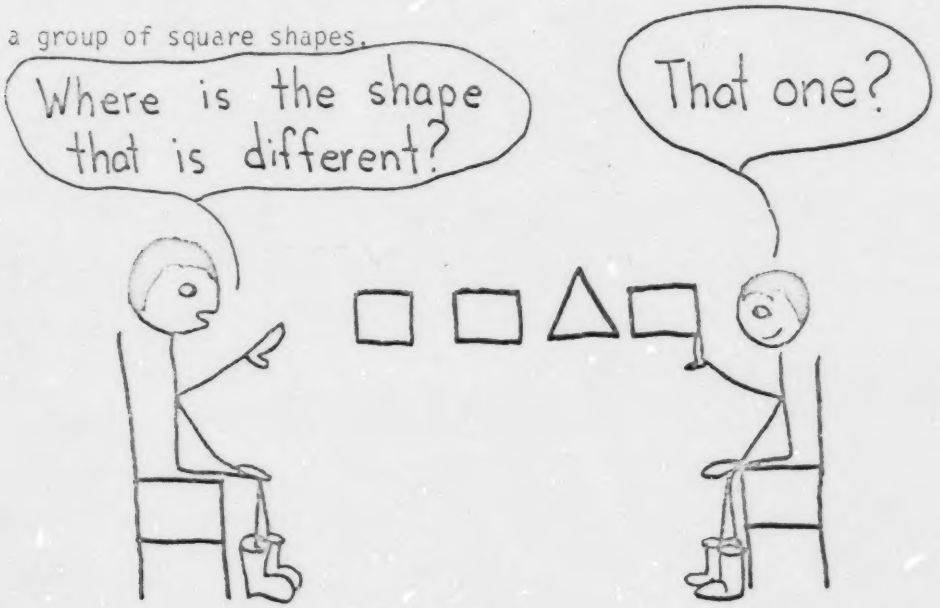




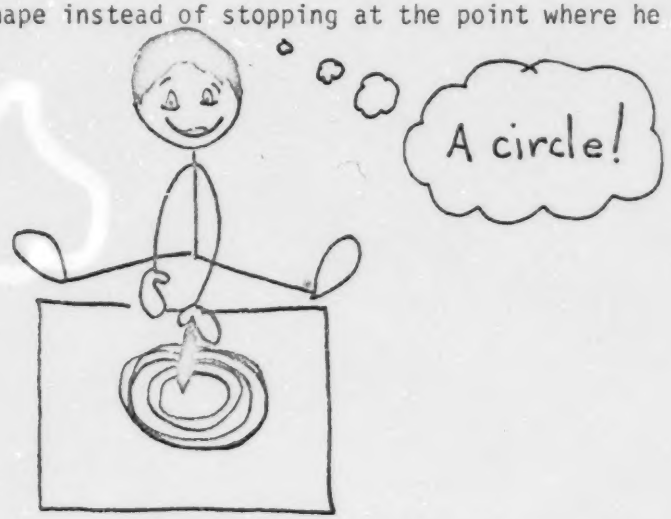
2. Poor spacial orientation - Difficulty remembering the differences in direction, that is, right from left, up from down, over from under, horizontal from vertical.



3. Poor figure ground orientation - Difficulty selecting one thing from a group. The child may not be able to spot a specific letter in a word, or distinguish his name from others, or find a triangular shape in a group of square shapes.



4. Perseveration - Difficulty stopping an activity. He may draw over and over a circle shape instead of stopping at the point where he started.



Or he may continue to give a known answer to unrelated questions.

Example:

"How many brothers do you have?" "Three."

"How many people in this room?" "Three."

"How many feet do you have?" "Three."

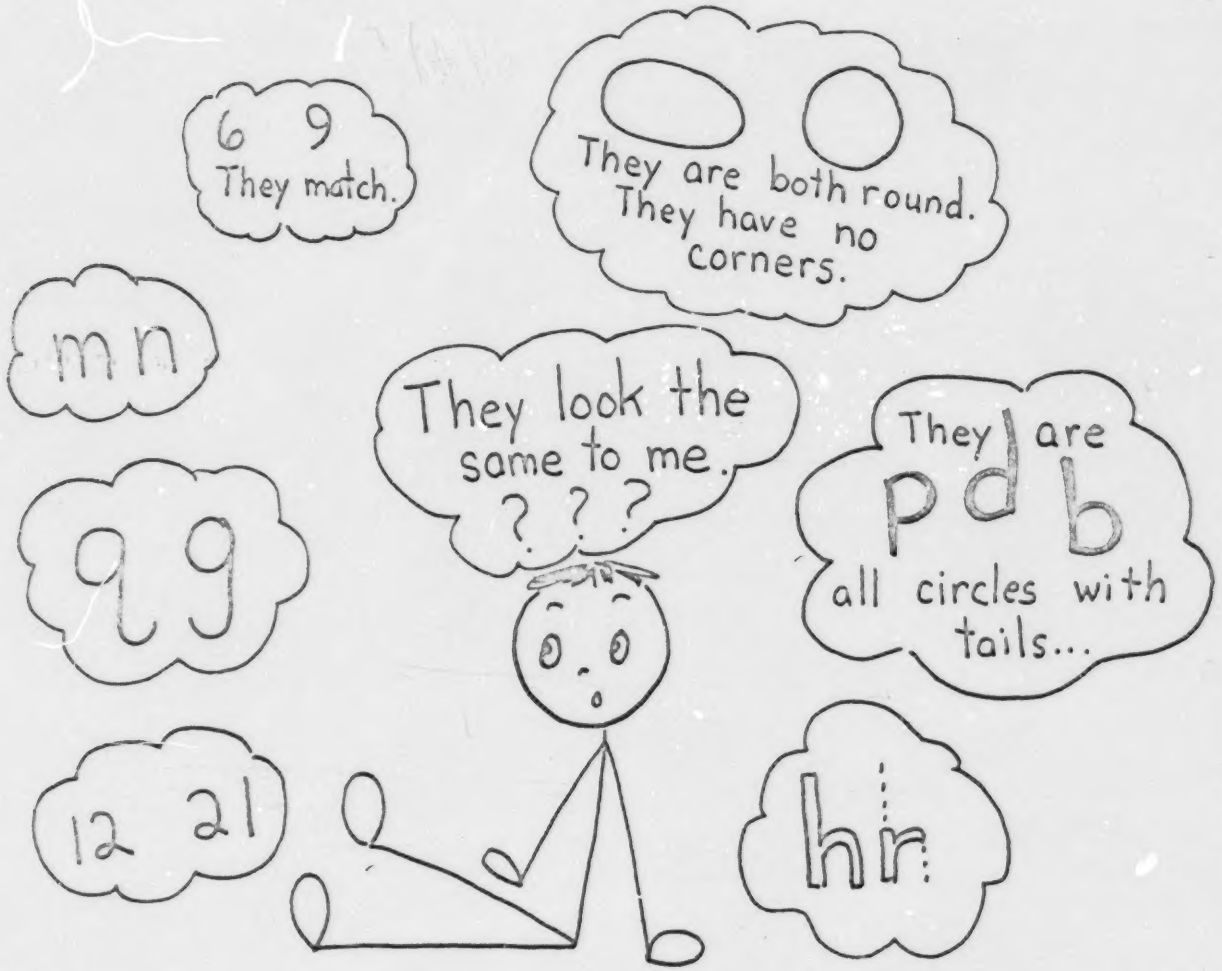
It may be difficult for him to move from one activity to another.

5. Poor visual discrimination - Difficulty distinguishing between somewhat similar visual stimuli, like these:

Circles and ovals

Letters like m, n, and h, r, p, b, d, g, q

Numbers like 6 and 9 or 21 and 12


6 9
They match.
They are both round. They have no corners.
m n
They look the same to me. ? ? ?
They are p d b all circles with tails...
q g
12 21
h r

6. Poor visual memory skills - Difficulty remembering what he has seen.

7. Poor auditory memory - Difficulty remembering what he has heard.

8. Hyperactivity - Difficulty paying attention, particularly in a structured situation. Learning disability produces very frustrating situations which may lead to hyperactive behavior such as distracting other children, talking at any time, running around, etc.

9. Poor self-image - To the casual observer, children with learning-disability problems are sometimes looked on as being dumb or sloppy, or "naughty." These reactions from others can easily affect any child's regard for himself.

Helping Children with Learning Disabilities

1. Multi-sensory approach. Try to use many of the child's senses when attempting to teach a concept or task. What he sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches, all will help him learn.

With a task like buttoning a coat, for example, you can help the child use several senses with instructions like these:

"Put the button through the hole." This gives the child an auditory clue as to what the task is.

"Feel the button. It's smooth, isn't it? And the coat is rough." Now the child has a tactual clue as to the different parts of the task.

"Watch what you are doing." This is a visual clue as to what the task looks like.

Guide his fingers through the motions of the task, giving a clue through the muscles as to what the fingers are supposed to be doing. The more senses involved in any task, the more likely are chances for eventual success.

2. Use the child's abilities to help him in difficult learning situations. If you know, or can find out, what avenues of learning are easiest for a particular child, use these to help him learn. For example, if the child remembers what he sees better than what he hears, give him as many visual clues in any learning situation as possible. Many children with learning disabilities can benefit from motor-memory tasks in learning situations. Instead of expecting the child to remember what he sees or hears, using this technique helps him remember by getting his body to recall a movement. In teaching the letter "A," as an example, you might ask the child to trace the letter in sand or finger paint, or use his finger to go over the letter. In this way, he may remember the movement of the letter better than he remembers how it looks or sounds.

3. Step-by-step learning. Children with learning problems are often confused by tasks that appear simple to other children of the same age. If the task can be broken down into different steps, the child can practice one step at a time and put them all together later on. Suppose, for example, that the class is cutting out pictures of cars from old magazines and pasting them on construction paper. "Cut out the cars and paste them on the paper," sounds like a simple task to us but a child with a learning disability may be confused by the instructions. For him, there are many many steps in that simple order. Many skills are involved in cutting and pasting.

The child has to know, first, what the cutting motion is all about. (He may need help learning how to hold the scissors, and he will certainly have to learn how to snip pieces of paper before he can learn to cut around a picture.)

He must know how to identify a car in a picture.

He must know how to dip the brush into the paste jar.

He must know how to put the paste on only one side of the picture.

He must learn which side is the right side to put the paste on.

He must learn that the picture must be placed somewhere on the construction paper.

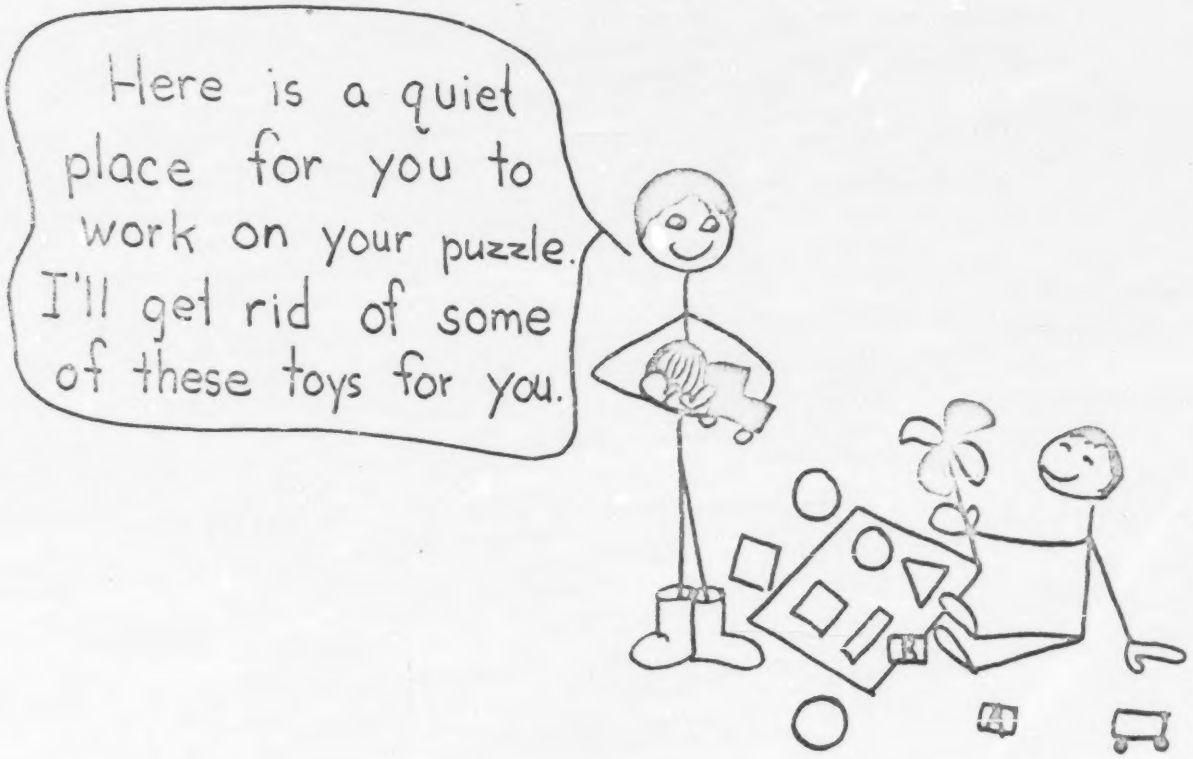
It is impossible to learn all of these things at once. The process of breaking down a task and teaching it step-by-step is the only successful way to teach a child with a learning problem.

4. Give directions in small steps. Multi-step directions can be confusing to the child with a learning disability. If instructions can be broken down into smaller steps, the child can complete each step individually and eventually complete the entire task.

Here is an example. Instead of saying, "Charlie, would you close the door and come sit down and get your cookie," try this:

5. Finding the next step. In learning any skill, not all children will have to start at the same level. It is a challenge to parents and teachers to know at what level a child is performing, and to discover what the next steps should be. This is not easy. It requires intimate knowledge of the child's abilities and limitations.

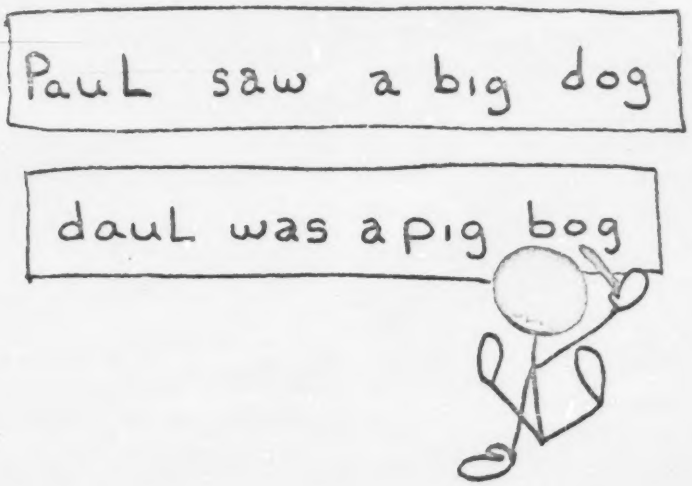
6. Reducing distractions. Children with learning disabilities often have difficulty maintaining their concentration on one specific task. Removing unnecessary noise, people, and equipment will help.



7. Building confidence. All children learn better when they feel that they are successful. Providing experiences that give opportunities for succeeding does much to maintain a good confidence level.

Detecting Learning Disabilities

Most cases of learning disability are not detected until school age, when the child starts working with symbols (written language and math). His lack of skill in these areas will quickly show difficulties in directionality and discrimination.



There are some signs the pre-school teacher can watch for which may indicate possible learning disability problems.

1. Extreme differences in performance areas. A child may use language very well and seem to have good abilities, but he may have great difficulty with his small motor skills. Or he may be very good at visual skills and very poor with auditory skills.

2. Confusion in handedness. By age 4 or so the majority of children use the same hand for most activities such as writing, drawing, painting, etc. Potential learning disability children often will alternate hands, switching the pencil from one hand to another.

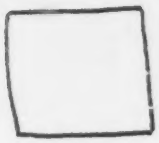
3. Poor visual motor skills. Children with learning disability often appear to be clumsy in paper and pencil activities.

4. Confusion in color, shape, and size recognition. Learning disability children often have difficulty in matching and verbally labeling colors, shapes and sizes.

5. Poor pattern duplication. By age 3 most children should be able to reproduce these patterns:

by age 4

by age 5



by age 6

Summary

Learning disability problems can be difficult for a child to cope with, mostly because the primary reasons for his difficulties are not intellectual, emotional, or physical. Some malfunction in his brain makes understanding certain tasks difficult for him. Though he may appear lazy and stubborn, he may actually be trying very hard to "do things right."

Postscript

The Educational Resources Information Center/Early Childhood Education Clearinghouse (ERIC/ECE) is one of a system of 16 clearinghouses sponsored by the National Institute of Education to provide information about current research and developments in the field of education. The clearinghouses, each focusing on a specific area of education (such as early childhood, teacher education, language and linguistics), are located at universities and institutions throughout the United States.

The clearinghouses search systematically to acquire current, significant documents relevant to education. These research studies, speeches, conference proceedings, curriculum guides, and other publications are abstracted, indexed and published in Research in Education (RIE), a monthly journal. RIE is available at libraries, or may be ordered from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

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